

26 Making virtual exchange/telecollaboration mainstream – large scale exchanges

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Abstract

Language educators' goals include promoting cultural understanding and improving the language skills of their students. Virtual Exchange (VE) is a powerful means to do this. Students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms often have few opportunities to communicate with other users of English. VE gives them virtual mobility, enabling them to participate in a global community, use English in real world communicative events and become more culturally acclimatized. Though there are many benefits to VE, it is often not easily accessible to teachers. This paper introduces a large scale VE that includes over 1500 students and 53 teachers from 21 institutions in six countries. The paper outlines benefits and drawbacks of this VE, some initial findings on student engagement and participation in the VE, in addition to information on how the project is planned to expand, making it accessible to a larger number of teachers and their students around the world.

Keywords: virtual exchange, telecollaboration, intercultural communication, language learning, EFL.

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1. Introduction

Many EFL classes, particularly in Asia and South America, have students from only one cultural background in them. Communication taking place in the classroom is between those same students, hence the immediacy of the Foreign Language (FL) is often lost. With the Internet came the possibility of VE. The [Intent project group \(2015\)](#) states VE is “technology-enabled, sustained, people to people education programs [...] entailing the engagement of groups of students in online intercultural exchange, interaction and collaboration with peers from partner classes in geographically distant locations, under the guidance of educators and/or expert facilitators” (para. 2). In its different forms, it has been shown to have a number of positive effects ([Chen & Yang, 2014](#); [Kern & Warschauer, 2000](#); [Pais Marden & Herrington, 2011](#)).

Dual Language VE (DLVE), often called eTandem, is possibly the more commonly used but is limited by the number of students studying one of the languages. Single Language VE (SLVE), where one language is used as the lingua franca, particularly when the language used is English, has a potentially far greater number of students able to join and thus the capability of becoming mainstream in EFL communication classes around the world.

2. The SLVE platform

The SLVE described here has students interacting asynchronously in English as a lingua franca. The server on which it is based is maintained with financial assistance from a Japanese government Kaken grant. Exchanges are carried out over 8 week periods using Moodle. Two, three or four classes from different countries are combined. Teachers from each of the participating classes send the exchange administrator a CSV file with their students' information and this is uploaded into the system. Alternatively, students access the system via Learning Tools Interoperability (LTI). Online groups are formed containing approximately 25 students from each of the countries. Hence, each group

would have between 40-50 (two countries) to 100 (four countries) students in it. Online communication then takes place using the Moodle forums. As groups are set to ‘separate’, multiple groups can be in the one VE participating in the same forums, but because they are ‘separate’, students only see the classmates they are paired with. In the present course there are 27 groups. Participation in the forums involves posting and replying using self created text, audio and video posts. Students can also add links and other multimedia to their posts. Almost all the students in this course are non-English majors at low-intermediate level.

Teachers are encouraged to monitor the forums and give feedback to students. They are also asked to keep in contact with their partner teacher and find out about their teaching and learning environments. Teachers are also offered resources to help their students reflect on their participation. There is no obligation to assign grades to students for their participation, but teachers are encouraged to do so. All teachers are included in a separate teachers’ course where they exchange ideas and information.

3. Course content

The discussion topics are ‘self introduction’, ‘about my place’, ‘events in our lives’, ‘future plans’ and one open forum. Each forum is open for three to four weeks. These topics were decided by the teachers involved in the initial exchange. In the teachers’ forum, ideas are being exchanged on how these may develop in the future. Admittedly, many of the criticisms that O’Dowd (2016) mentions apply here. The topics are limiting and the intercultural learning is not guaranteed just because the students are linked. Genres are also blurred. However, if students are beginners or of a low intermediate level, forum topics need to be simple. With only pre-intermediate language skills or less, students are limited in what they can do. It is impossible for beginner level language students to participate fully in topics of deeper meaning and pushing them to do so can result in miscommunication and possibly develop resentment toward their partner because of this. Hence, in these beginner level exchanges, the style

is often one of “a written exchange but in the form of a spoken chat” (Ware & Kramsch, 2005, cited in O’Dowd, 2016, p. 285). Starting with a simple VE, teachers can prepare their students for more robust tasks. As the alternative is a mono-cultural classroom with no real world communication, VE is to be preferred.

Presently, teachers are encouraged to ensure students reflect on the interactions taking place and introduce concepts of intercultural learning. At this language level, perhaps true ‘intercultural learning’ does not take place but cultural acclimatization certainly does. Before climbers ascend a major peak they acclimatize themselves at lower levels. VE students, who have never had interaction with foreign culture, do not have the shock that often comes with physically entering another country. VE is a far more gentle introduction to foreign culture and can therefore be considered a form of cultural acclimatization.

4. Feedback

Student responses in surveys carried out to date have been, where the forums are active, overwhelmingly positive. Perhaps some of the positive feedback can be attributed to ‘the illusion of commonality’ (Ware & Kramsch, 2005, cited in O’Dowd, 2016, p. 277), but students are being exposed to other cultures that they would not be without the VE and this reduces students’ initial fear of all things foreign. It is also a motivator for them to begin learning more deeply about other cultures.

There have been situations where students from a partnered class, for a variety of reasons, did not participate in the forums to the level expected. When students post but receive no replies, obviously their responses in follow up surveys will be less than positive. This is the number one issue that has plagued some of the group exchanges. Teacher interaction is key to reducing the angst felt by students not receiving replies. If students understand the problems in the other country, they are more understanding. In some cases, due to poor teacher to teacher communication, information was not passed

onto students, leaving some with bitter feelings toward their partner class. With better teacher to teacher communication and more planning, these problems can be overcome.

5. Future of the VE

To ensure the problems outlined by O'Dowd (2016) above are taken into consideration, this VE will develop to allow students longer participation. There is a pilot continuers' course for some of the students that participated in previous VE. This will develop to include more robust tasks. We also plan to create two more levels – an intermediate and advanced level in which students will have the language skills to participate in collaborative tasks and carry out projects that will lead to real intercultural learning whilst developing their language skills further. It will be carried out on the International Virtual Exchange Project's site iveproject.org. Our goal is to have approximately 20,000 students participating in three levels by 2020. The project is open to more institutions joining until that point in time. The server configuration and courseware will then become creative commons so others who want to create a similar project can easily do so.

6. Conclusion

When used well, VE is a powerful method for language educators to improve their students' communication skills and cultural awareness. However, from a technical and practical perspective it is often difficult for teachers to do so, as they do not have the technical prowess or the contacts to find a partner class. The project detailed here is one simple way for teachers to join in a VE project and attain all the benefits therein. As VE becomes more mainstream, teachers will, more and more, want their students to use the language they are learning in real world communication. If cultural acclimatization can also occur as a precursor to cultural competence, then another major benefit has been achieved. The VE outlined here is one way of achieving those goals.

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